BRILL

ERSY 29 (2009) 103–143

Erasmus of Rotterdam
Society Yearbook
Twenty-Nine

www.brill.nl/eras

Reviews

Thomas P. Scheck, *Origen and the History of Justification: The Legacy of Origen's Commentary on Romans* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008). 312 pp. ISBN 978-0-268-04128-3.

This exploration of the reception history of Rufinus' Latin translation of Origen's *Commentary on Romans* represents a significant contribution to historical biblical scholarship. Scheck brings into focus Origen's immense influence upon the exegetical tradition of the Church and points to the relevance of his pioneering insights for modern exegetes seeking both to understand the issues surrounding the doctrine of justification by faith alone and to move beyond the impasse between the churches bequeathed them by the Reformation.

The book comprises two parts. The first begins with a brief survey of modern scholarship (both Catholic and Protestant) covering Einar Molland, Reinhold Seeberg, Jacques Riviere, Camille Verfaillie, Theresia Heither, and Maurice F. Wiles, all of whom agree that, for Origen, both faith and post-baptismal works are essential to Pauline justification. This is followed by a sketch of the polemical context and anti-heretical intention at work in Origen's *Commentary on Romans* (henceforth *CRm*). Against Valentinus and Basilides, Origen maintains that it is the exercise of free will and not the "pneumatic," "psychic," or "hylic" nature of a person's soul that enters into God's good judgment. Against those influenced by Marcion, Origen stresses the unity both of the Old and New Testaments and of Christ as "Savior, Advocate, and Judge" (29). Scheck then outlines the *CRm*'s pivotal arguments: *Romans*' central theme is the movement from imperfect to perfect religion; Spirit and Law are not contraries, but by means of the Spirit a perfected Law is fulfilled; Paul is an arbiter between Jews and Gentiles who are equally "under sin"; the justice of God is all at once a divine quality, the created Christ, a divinizing infusion of Christ's grace through the Holy Spirit, and Christ's indwelling in the heart; justification by faith cleanses past sin and infuses the believer with the life of Christ, thereby effecting a renewal of the virtues and enabling progress in the fulfillment of the Law; sin shall be imputed to the faithful

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2009
DOI: 10.1163/027628509X12548457758023

even after justification should they choose to turn away from the life of Christ; and the "works of the Law" repudiated by Paul consist exclusively of those associated with Jewish ceremonial law. Scheck concludes the first chapter by turning again to modern scholarship and its positioning of Origen's thought in relation to Pelagius' and Augustine's understandings of grace and works. He shows Origen anticipating Augustine in claiming that even faith is a gift of God. Less Augustinian, however, is Origen's claim that the good works of unbelievers will be rewarded. In this first part, Scheck successfully establishes a limited ecumenical consensus in support of his thesis: namely, that Origen provides a clear and instructive point of departure (which later chapters will show has appealed consistently to both Catholic and Protestant exegetes, and to the latter in spite of the initial Lutheran and Calvinist rejections) for an exegesis of *Romans* that sees good works as a necessary consequence and corollary of Pauline justification by faith alone.

In the second part of the book (chapters two through seven), Scheck examines the reception of Origen's (Latin) *CRm* by Pelagius, Augustine, William of St. Thierry, Erasmus, Luther and Melanchthon, and Richard Montagu and Cornelius Jansen. In chapter two, Scheck shows Pelagius, in his own *Commentary on Romans*, engaging in extensive yet selective borrowing from Origen. As a result of their polemical character—Pelagius is arguing principally against the Manichaeans—both works are anti-deterministic and describe predestination as God's foreknowledge of human merit. While there is much that Pelagius passes over in silence, he follows Origen in seeing Paul as an arbiter between Jews and Gentiles equally condemned in their sin, affirming the necessity of good works while denying that works alone can merit salvation and understanding Paul as solely repudiating works of ceremonial law.

In the third chapter, Scheck argues for Augustine's familiarity with Origen's *CRm* after the year 396. The *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, he suggests, borrows from Origen in arguing against Pelagius' understanding of the transmission of sin. Scheck also contends that although Augustine interprets Paul as rejecting both ceremonial *and* moral law, the difference between their views on justification has more to do with Augustine's anti-gnostic and Origen's anti-Pelagian intentions. Ultimately, both would agree that although good works of themselves cannot earn justification, through God's help and grace they may contribute to the process. Further parallels to Origen's *CRm* are found in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos 31*, in which Augustine uses the Epistle of James to correct misreadings of Paul and borrows both the metaphor of works as the fruit issuing forth from the root of faith and the description of salvation as a process in which "faith, hope, and love (1Cor. 13.13) … [are] respectively the

beginning, advancement, and culmination" (95). The last section before the chapter's conclusion is an outline of Augustine's opposition to a number of Origenian heresies, none of which, significantly, is focused upon the role that faith and post-baptismal works play in justification, or upon the conception of justification as a renovation in the virtues. Scheck devotes considerable effort in this chapter to the rapprochement of Augustine and Origen. Whether or not his bracketing of polemical intention in pursuit of a less affected meaning is convincing (or consistent with the work as a whole) is open to debate.

The fourth chapter shows William of St. Thierry, in the twelfth century, borrowing extensively from Origen while adding anti-Pelagian glosses. Scheck begins by noting the unacknowledged debt that St. Jerome (d. 420) owed to Origen's exegesis and Cassiodorus' (490–583) recommendation to his readers of Origen's *CRm* as foremost among *Romans* commentaries. According to Scheck, these two practices—in Jerome's case, plagiarizing large portions of Origen's texts without acknowledging their source and in Cassiodorus' case, lauding Origen as preeminent in his (orthodox) interpretation of *Romans*—set the mold for the later medieval receptions of Origen's Pauline exegesis, from Notker the Stammerer (840–912) through Aquinas and Abelard to Augustinus Favaroni of Rome (1360–1443). Scheck gives an account of Louis Bouyer and Jean-Marie Dechanet's depictions of William as harmonizing Augustinian and Origenian theology, and of George Anderson and Steven Cartwright's objections to this thesis on the grounds of William's overriding Augustinianism. Scheck then examines a number of William's borrowings from Origen, including the distinction between the observance and the fulfillment of the Law, arguments concerning faith and grace, and renewal through acts. The doctrinal importance of such borrowings notwithstanding, the accent in William is always Augustinian: the soul may exercise its freedom in choosing good only by the prevenient grace of God. Scheck concludes that William makes ample use of Origen as an exegetical guide to Paul's *Letter to the Romans* and of Augustine's theology as a guide to the assimilation of Origen's exegesis.

The fifth chapter concentrates on Erasmus. Despite the preeminence attributed to Origen in his writings, Scheck argues that Erasmus should not properly be considered an "Origenian." What is too often overlooked is Erasmus' tendency to adopt Origen's arguments and positions, particularly when they are the material of subsequent patristic consensus. It is the retrieval of a synchronic understanding of Scripture and of patristic consensus, and not of Origenian doctrine, that is Erasmus' main goal. The exegetical importance of Origen's *CRm* is threefold. First, it is the oldest extant "witness to the original text of Scripture" (134). Second, it "untangle[s] grammatical and

terminological difficulties" (134). Third, it is "the source of much of the Eastern and Western exegetical tradition" (134). Scheck shows that in his *Paraphrase on Romans*, Erasmus borrows not only the content and explanatory metaphors of Origen's *CRm*, but occasionally the very manner of paraphrasing as well. Following Origen, Erasmus sees the "handing over" of sinners (Rom. 1: 18) as an example of divine permission rather than causation; true Judaism as a matter of inward circumcision or purification (Rom. 2: 29); Paul as refuting Jewish ceremonial law alone (Rom. 3: 21–22); justification as requiring a life committed to purification; moral renewal as naturally consequent to faith *and* love; law as being divided by Paul into the opposed categories of flesh and spirit; election as referring to the foreknowledge of merit and not to the imposition of necessity; and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as an illustration of the mercy and not of the arbitrary and destructive will of God. Using this last example, Scheck describes Erasmus' disagreement with Luther's doctrine of irresistible necessity. He then gives an overview of the renaissant interest in Origen among Erasmus' near contemporaries Cristoforo Persona, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Aldus Manutius, Egidio da Viterbo, Theophilus Salodianus, and Jacques Merlin. Alongside new editions and translations of many of Origen's works, several of these celebrated figures composed elegant defenses of Origen's orthodoxy. Erasmus, for his part, was content to excuse Origen's "errors" either as the natural (if unfortunate) missteps of a trailblazing pioneer, as dubiously attributed to him by overzealous critics, or as purely intellectual and involving no serious inner attachment.

The sixth chapter is devoted to Luther and Melanchthon. Citing a series of fiery passages, Scheck shows that Luther's conversion and subsequent understanding of "justification by faith alone" rendered the Fathers' teachings superfluous. While Melancthon publicly traced the roots of Lutheran doctrine back to Augustine's *Confessions*, his private correspondence demonstrates to Scheck that both he and Luther rejected Augustine's understanding of justification. For Melanchthon, justification is always only a matter of imputation. When works are referred to, they refer synecdochically to faith and the imputation of justice, but when faith is referred to it must not be taken as synecdoche for general renewal of the other virtues. At this point, one may wonder whether a rapprochement similar to that already wrought between Augustine and Origen in the third chapter might not be employed with equal legitimacy here between the Lutheran camp and Augustinian theology—especially in view of Lutheran claims to that effect. The conclusion that Scheck draws from Melanchthon's and Luther's writings is that Augustine, like Origen and Aquinas and Melanchthon's contemporary opponents, misinterprets

Paul's message when he represents faith as the commencement of justification. For Melanchthon, the Church fell away from the original Christian gospel largely because Origen's erroneous interpretation of justification met with near consensus among later Church Fathers.

The seventh chapter gives an account of Origen's *CRm* in post-Reformation controversies. In a curious historical turn, although Calvin and Beza shared Luther's repudiation of Origen, other influential Protestants, including Flacius Illyricus, Martin Chemnitz, Thomas Cranmer, and Heinrich Bullinger, enlisted Origen and his *CRm* in order to *affirm* the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Similarly, arguing against the Catholic John Heigham, Richard Montagu enlisted Origen's argument that justification is by faith alone, with faith and works forming an inseparable unity and works being necessary for salvation. Surprisingly, the anti-Calvinist Montagu claimed Origen as a perfect Protestant who had precisely anticipated "Anglican" doctrine. Origen's exegesis somehow garners Protestant approval in spite of Luther's anathemas and Catholic approval in spite of being deemed perfect Protestant doctrine. The chapter concludes with a brief but instructive discussion of Cornelius Jansen. This notable critic of the Jesuits argued that in making grace and election partially dependent upon prior human merit, Origen was an "architect" of the Pelagianism of which Jansen also accused Biel and later Molinists. Scheck notes the original reaction of the Church to Jansen's accusations and sides with Catholic tradition in questioning the validity of his broad view of Pelagianism. This final discussion makes perfectly clear that although Protestantism was not univocal in its endorsement of his interpretation of Romans, Origen remained an important authority and source for Protestant as well as Catholic camps in the debates over justification well into the post-Reformation era.

Scheck has given us a highly readable and insightful introduction to Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, its historical reception, and the major theological positions that have drawn from its pages and for which, remarkably, it continues to be a valuable, and perhaps ultimately indispensable, reference text. Notably, Scheck seems to model his efforts in this book upon what he perceives to be Erasmus' central intention. The retrieval of patristic consensus in Erasmus becomes the retrieval or discovery of an ecumenical consensus regarding Pauline justification based upon or under the tutelage of Origen and traditional exegesis.

Matthew Evans-Cockle
University of British Columbia